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PUBLIC SCULPTURE

Timber ‘boxes’ break the Canberra mould

From a distance it is almost invisible, but in the concrete-dominated architectural zoo of Canberra’s major institutional buildings, the Commonwealth Place Kiosks are a welcome relief – in more ways than one.

Australia’s Parliament House and adjacent major public buildings present as an imposing, robust and earnest collection in concrete. So when architects Terroir were commissioned by the National Capital Authority (NCA) to build a public toilet and ice-cream kiosk in the immediate foreground on the edge of Lake Burley Griffin, it seemed time for an alternative material.

The new amenity buildings would be small (less than 50m²) and of ‘prosaic’ use when compared with the presumably loftier aspirations of those using adjacent structures. So, how does one install a toilet and kiosk just metres from the central axis connecting the Parliament and lake?

The NCA’s decision to locate a public amenity in the context of so much architectural muscle was a positive gesture intended to increase daily use of the Parliamentary Zone. To soften the structure’s impact on its august and conservative surroundings, the architects designed the kiosks as a ‘public sculpture’: blank timber boxes installed within this largest of sculptured parks.

“The design is an essay in a sort of hyper-formality, responding to nuances in Griffin’s geometry at an urban scale, yet realised in a taut, blunt form,” Terroir associate Tamara Donnellan told *timberDESIGN*.

Wood was chosen to separate the kiosks from the surrounding national institutions, and because of their proximity to a timber jetty. A ‘singular’ quality is created by using spotted gum cladding on all surfaces, and in avoiding any predominant grids or sub-geometries that would diminish the ‘monumental’ effect.

“That is why the movement joints between timber elements were arranged in an informal manner, so as not to subdivide the block forms into smaller pieces. Instead, the effect is of a single form with a series of random lines that do not suggest further subdivision,” says Donnellan.

To achieve the desired degree of ‘invisibility’ in the larger context, a grey finish was chosen, which unifies the kiosks with the surrounding concrete paving and makes them all but disappear when viewed from a distance.

Spotted gum was selected because it was local and for its natural properties of hardness and durability, lower tannin than other eucalypts and termite resistance. Because the structure was being built for a public authority, the grey effect was required from day one, and Cabot’s hacienda grey decking stain was chosen.

A key detailing consideration was the decision to increase the number of movement joints – to improve cladding longevity and to achieve a random pattern of joints, using black silicone. But the biggest challenge was in the corner detailing where the desire for the buildings to read as a single block required all corner junctions to be mitred.

Donnellan says Canberra’s ‘variable’ climate is often used as a reason to avoid timber. “But the equally variable Scandinavian climate has not prohibited a continual and substantial use of timber on many public and commercial projects.

“Timber was chosen very much to satisfy an urban design aim and not for reasons of the material’s inherent qualities. Also, the expectations for a public building in Canberra demand an extreme formality and, thus,

the client did not want a ‘relaxed’ approach to timber expression and detailing. “That is why the detailing and finishing of the timber ‘dematerialises’ it to some extent – as opposed to a celebration of timber and its inherent figuring, colour, texture and so on. We are, however, using this approach on a house under construction where timber is being used on nearly all surfaces inside and out, and where its inherent characteristics are brought to the fore.

“Like a giant piece of timber furniture, this house will be remembered for the look, feel and smell of the material – in complete opposition to our approach with the Canberra kiosks,” says Donnellan.

TOP The timber finish links and merges with the immediate surroundings

MIDDLE LEFT Extra movement joints were added to improve cladding longevity and achieve a random pattern

MIDDLE RIGHT Hidden system of coloured light-filtering tubes represent autumn the tonal range

BOTTOM Spotted gum-clad toilet and the ice cream kiosks flank Canberra’s architectural heavyweights

PROJECT Commonwealth Place Kiosks, Canberra
 CLIENT National Capital Authority
 ARCHITECTS Terroir Pty Ltd
 FACILITATORS Steenson Varming (Australia)
 STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS Hughes Trueman
 BUILDER Manteena Pty Ltd
 WOOD PRODUCTS Spotted gum cladding
 AWARDS 2008 Dulux Colour Awards (winner: commercial exterior); 2008 RAI (ACT Chapter) (commendation: urban design)
 PHOTOGRAPHY Brett Boardman

